



Understanding the Communications and Information Needs of Elected Officials for Transportation Planning and Operations

There are over 100,000 State and local elected officials in the United States, ranging from governors to village selectmen. There are tens of thousands of appointed officials who are key to the transportation perspective of the elected officials. The challenge is how to communicate to State and local decision-makers emerging transportation planning and operations concepts. The premise of this paper is that effective communications must be built on knowing who the players are, understanding the context in which they operate, and identifying some principles to consider when designing outreach strategies.

State and Local Transportation Decision-Makers

- **State level.** Elected officials include governors and State legislators. Appointed officials typically include secretaries of transportation, commissioners, and often some form of State transportation board.
- **Local level.** Mayors (or whatever the chief local elected official may be called) range from “strong” mayors in major cities where they are the chief executive officers to “weak” mayors in most cities and towns that operate on a “council-manager” form of governance. In these cases, the city or town manager is usually the CEO. Additionally, there will be a council of some sort. Appointed officials typically include a director of transportation or public works.

Environment in Which Elected Officials Operate.

Elected officials...

- represent constituencies

“I am elected from a place, by its people. My job is to speak up for their interests and concerns. It’s that simple.”

- John G. Milliken, former member of Arlington Board and Secretary of Transportation (Virginia)

- must be sensitive to fulfilling the promises or commitments made in their campaign
- are sensitive to the process, tend to abide by the ‘rules of the road’ for their organization

“The chair of the legislative committee has great power. The chair controls the agenda, the testimony, and the amount of time allotted to the issue. Committee members defer to the chair and it is rare the chair does not prevail.”

- Thomas D. Rust, Member, House of Delegates, Virginia

- are dependent on staff
- live in an arena of competing imperatives – economic development vs environmental and quality of life issues, the “American dream” vs sprawl, social needs vs school needs vs transportation needs, and so on

“Local elected officials must manage public expectations about transportation. We walk a fine line between almost unlimited public demand for unfettered mobility on the one hand, and very limited public support for increased tax revenue with which to finance these improvements on the other. In addition, achieving a public consensus about best solutions to congestion is riven with the challenges of NIMBY-ism, smart growth resistance, and roads vs. transit debate. It is a painful conundrum.”

- Gerry Connolly, Chairman, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, Virginia

- tend to be respectful of colleagues’ turf
- recognize that inter-personal relationships are usually the key to getting things done
- have some particular area of interest – affordable housing, social services, education, etc.
- have limited time in which to address any specific issue
- like to be given credit and recognition for successful projects, programs or solutions
- are extremely sensitive to fiscal constraints; virtually all decry the growing shortfalls
- prefer “plain speak”

“Have you often asked yourself, ‘Who were those guys and what did they say?’ The most frustrating part of an elected official’s job is to listen to a presentation by a group of engineers, planners, or other highly technical individuals, who use their own language, often filled with acronyms, technical terms, and other professional forms of communication. These dynamics tend to create an environment that can prevent elected officials from taking a proverbial leap of faith to acceptance.”

- Randall Morris, Commissioner of Seminole County, Florida

And, finally, elected officials like to get re-elected.

Communicating with Elected Officials

Political reasons why elected officials get involved

- Issue is of particular interest to elected official's party or constituency group
- Involvement affords opportunity to become a leader with legislative body
- Engagement may afford opportunity for alignment(s)
- Issue may be high visibility, has potential for media coverage
- Constituents will perceive elected official is doing important work

Personal reasons why elected official may become involved

- Keen personal interest
- Desire to tackle tough or relevant challenge
- Enhanced knowledge of an issue
- Response to concerns raised by personal friend, political advisor, or family

Factors that affect decision-makers decisions:

- Merits/Content of a recommendation – germane and relevant
- How the issue is framed – framed in a manner that is relevant to elected official and his/her role
- Timing of proposal – need time for reflection and consultation with others
- Reality check – a recognition of the reality in which the specific official operates
- Form of message – what form selected, information must be concise and easily absorbed
- Who delivers the message – absolutely critical. Peers in whom the elected/appointed official has confidence are often the best messenger.

Outreach Principles to Consider

- Understand and appreciate the environment in which elected officials operate

“Three key points need to be made in any communication: 1) What action do you want me to take? 2) Why should I support this action? And 3) How does it impact my constituents?”
- Sarah Siwek, President of Sarah J. Siwek and Associates

- Identify the key leaders and champions relevant to the issue being pursued
- Appreciate that elected/appointed officials are heavily influenced by peers
- Express issues and recommendations in a manner that will be relevant and understood by elected officials

“First, do your research. To communicate effectively with elected officials, start by identifying why they should care. Understand their perspectives and the issues in the area they represent. Maybe they have congestion of a major arterial in their district. Perhaps safety is a key concern for their community. By making clear connections to the issues they face, elected officials will be more likely to respond positively.”
- Anne Canby, President, Surface Transportation Policy Project

- Consider how local elected officials can leverage funds

“What impresses members of the General Assembly is how you can leverage public funds.”
- Whittington W. Clement, Secretary of Transportation, Virginia

- Design a path that may include key advisory staff and/or the associations within which the elected official operates
- Don't wait until an issue is critical to establish a relationship with key decision-makers. It is important to have ongoing, credible relationships
- Recognize that key staff members influence both substance and the process

“Working with gatekeepers is necessary and crucial to securing the desired support from elected officials.”
- Sarah Siwek, President of Sarah J. Siwek and Associates

- Be realistic and forthright
- Appreciate the need for short term products or deliverables
- Listen to them!